

A JUST AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEM

In early March, PROOF, an interdisciplinary research program investigating household food insecurity in Canada, reported that NWT food insecurity was high at 21.6%. Since the pandemic struck, we are realizing that, in fact, we are all more food insecure than we thought.

The current pandemic is a wakeup call that failing to take nature into account puts our own health in danger. Without a healthy planet, we cannot nourish ourselves.

What have we learned so far from the pandemic? Our globalized, international grocery supply chain experienced major disruptions and we witnessed bare shelves. Much food was wasted as restaurants closed and other markets disappeared. Our initial reaction was often to hoard. Seed companies are experiencing huge delays while isolation plans for migrant farm workers are causing disruptions that are bound to have ripple effects throughout the growing season. Meat plants were closed as virus outbreaks infected workers. Interestingly, low-paid food industry workers are now recognized as essential workers.

But not all of it is bad! We are cooking more at home and many have decided to re-acquire basic food skills. We are seeing an increase in the sharing of information on how to grow food, and preparation for gardening. A recent Angus Reid survey showed that Canadians are more willing to buy locally grown food. In some jurisdictions, farmers markets and community gardens are declared essential services.

Our public recovery dollars should support a long-term vision of sustainability and resilience in our food systems. Many of those principles are already embodied in the vision of the Yellowknife Food Charter. Let's make it NWT wide!

A just and sustainable food system is rooted in a healthy community, where everyone has access to adequate and affordable nutritious food; more food is grown and harvested locally; and food production policies and infrastructure are in place to support an economically viable, diverse, and ecologically sustainable local food system.

A just and sustainable food system means:

- The human right to safe and secure access to adequate food is honoured and everyone is food secure.
- Everyone has access to knowledge about a just and sustainable food system.
- Equitable, healthy relationships exist among all people in the food system.
- Food-based entrepreneurial initiatives are essential to sustainable local economies.
- The benefits of local food based economic development are celebrated and leveraged.
- Food producers, harvesters, and entrepreneurs generate value from their work and use ecologically sustainable practices.
- Indigenous and traditional practices are respected and supported.
- Community members have confidence in the quality, safety, supply, and distribution of food.
- Public policy and infrastructure reflect these principles of a just and sustainable food system.

To meet those goals is not an option, it is a must if we are to feed ourselves. Some ideas and suggestions to think about:

- Training our own workforce through the Northern Farm Training Institute
- Support the expansion of already existing commercial growers
- Develop production and markets within the NWT to decrease dependence on transportation
- Small abattoirs with scale-appropriate regulations
- Low tech solutions adapted to the North to grow and preserve food
- Develop and save our own seeds
- Economic development that feeds us first
- Declare farmers markets and community gardens essential services
- Grow nutrient and calorie dense crops
- Keep NWT non-GMO, embrace human scale farms, grow organic, using regenerative technique to fight against climate change
- Strengthen ties with northern Alberta and BC for sourcing food for the North.

We can grow a food culture across the NWT, and it can feed all of us. Let's all sit at this table together. The sooner the better, because with climate change, the next crisis is never far. As we design our recovery from the pandemic, will we build in greater food security for any future challenges?